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A LETTER

TO

THE FELLOWS OF THE ROYAL

AND THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETIES,

IN REPLY TO THE

OBITUARY NOTICE

OF THE LATE REV. RICHARD SHEEPSHANKS,

BY THE

PRESIDENT AND COUNCIL OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY;

AND

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL

OF THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

TO THE THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING.

WITH AN APPENDIX,

CONTAINING THE COPY OF A MEMORANDUM

PRESENTED BY THE EARL OF ROSSE TO THE COUNCIL OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY

FOR RENDERING THE COUNCIL OF THE SOCIETY MORE EFFICIENT,

AND WHICH HAS NOT BEEN COMMUNICATED TO THE FELLOWS.

BY

SIR JAMES SOUTH, F.R.S.

LONDON:

[For Private Circulation only.]

1856.



TO THE FELLOWS OF THE ROYAL AND THE ROYAL  
ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETIES.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,—In the Report of the Council 1855-56 to the Thirty-sixth Annual Meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society (vol. xvi. pp. 96, 97), a paragraph, of which the following is a copy, appears :—

“ The last of Mr. Sheepshanks’ publications was a defensive pamphlet, or partly defensive, in answer to an imputation, to which we need not here allude further than by describing it as an impeachment of his integrity, upon the evidence of a conversation alleged to have been held thirty years before it was brought forward, with an eminent man who died twenty years before it was brought forward. Of course, this sort of evidence never received the slightest attention from any of the scientific bodies before whom it was proposed for inquiry ; nor would it have been mentioned here, public as the matter has become, except simply to record that sense of the utter needlessness of any reply to such an accusation, which the Council showed when they neglected the formal application made to them on the charge. The subject of this memoir lived in the regard and respect of all who knew what he was, and were unbiassed by the feelings which controversy too often creates. In this Society he must always be remembered with gratitude as an earnest friend, a laborious servant,

an enlightened manager, and a conscientious administrator."

The late Council of the Royal Astronomical Society having thus made the adulation of the *dead* a means of slandering the *living*, and alluded to the personal differences which existed between the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks and myself, I am most reluctantly and painfully compelled to refer to matters from which I should otherwise have refrained.

I may perhaps be permitted to observe *in limine*, that in the "Obituary Notices" which are published by the Councils of the Royal and Royal Astronomical Societies, common decency requires that they should contain nothing likely to stir up personal feelings: the works of the deceased person, any details of his history likely to encourage others in the pursuit of science, any praise of him consistent with *truth*, are legitimate topics for such notices, but it is an abuse to make them *libels on the living*; and not less so to identify Societies with the bad passions of individual members of their Councils.

A few days previous to the Annual Visitation of the Royal Observatory of Greenwich, in June, 1854, the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks, as I am informed, printed, and caused to be distributed among the Visitors, an unfinished pamphlet in respect of our personal controversies; but I never

received a copy of it from him—I have not read one word of it, and have never been able to procure it.

At the Anniversary Meeting of the Royal Society, 1854, the late Rev. Richard Sheepshanks caused to be distributed among the Fellows as they entered the hall-door leading to the apartments of the Society, a pamphlet intituled—

“A Letter to the Board of Visitors of the Greenwich Royal Observatory, in reply to the Calumnies of Mr. Babbage at their Meeting in June 1853, and in his book entitled *The Exposition of 1851*. By the Rev. R. Sheepshanks, M.A., one of the Visitors.

Lædere gaudes,  
Inquis; et hoc studio pravus facis. Unde petitum  
Hoc in me jadis? est auctor quis denique eorum  
Vixi cum quibus?

London: Printed by G. Barclay, Castle Street, Leicester Square. 1854.”

Having been told that this pamphlet was replete with abuse of myself, I, without reading it, placed a copy of it in the hands of Mr. A. J. Stephens, one of the Fellows of the Royal Society, and requested him, as “my friend,” to advise me how to act.

A few days afterwards, Mr. Stephens advised me not to take the slightest notice of the pamphlet, or even to read it. He also considered that, as the pamphlet purported to be a “Reply to the Calumnies of Mr. Babbage,” it was more incumbent upon Mr. Babbage to publish a reply to the abuse of Mr. Sheepshanks than a duty devolving on me.

Mr. Stephens, at a subsequent interview, also stated that Lord Rosse and Dr. Paris concurred in opinion with himself, that I ought not to take any notice of Mr. Sheepshanks' pamphlet.

Placing the utmost reliance on the judgment and friendship of Mr. Stephens, and Mr. Babbage having acquainted me that he intended to answer the calumnies of the Reverend Richard Sheepshanks, I neither replied to, nor did I even read the pamphlet or any portion of it, until after my perusal of the "Obituary Notices of deceased Fellows" of the Royal Society for 1854-55, and after the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society had made their report to the Thirty-sixth Annual General Meeting of their Society.

I deem it essential, in self-justification, to submit the following statement of facts for your consideration.

On the 19th of January, 1852, Mr. Babbage came to Campden Hill, brought with him the Review of his "Exposition 1851," which had then recently appeared in the *Mechanics' Magazine*, and read it to me. On his coming to the words: "If this be not subornation of perjury, it is very like it;" I reminded him of a real case of subornation of perjury in which, on the late Mr. Troughton's word to me, the Reverend Richard Sheepshanks had asked Mr. Troughton to let one of his men go to the Custom-house to clear, as an English instrument, a circle of Jecker's, on which Mr. Sheepshanks

had had engraved the name of "Troughton," to evade the duty.

Mr. Babbage proposed that these facts should be embodied in a letter to the Editor of the *Mechanics' Magazine*; and the result was, that the following letter appeared in that publication on January 24, 1852:—

" IN RE BABBAGE V. SHEEPSHANKS.

" 'If this be not subornation of perjury, it is very like it.'—*Mech. Mag.*  
Jan. 17, 1852.

" SIR,—The perusal of the able article in your Journal, from which the above extract is taken, has called to my mind a parallel instance of quasi-subornation of perjury, which you may perhaps deem not unworthy a corner in your pages, illustrating, as it does very strongly, how British workmen are but too often injured in their reputation by foreign counterfeits, and how the practice derives encouragement from the low state of moral feeling prevailing as well among scientific (or rather pseudo-scientific) as among fashionable circles.

" For very many years, I was on terms of the closest intimacy with the late Mr. Troughton. Calling, as was my habit, almost every day, I found him on one occasion in a state of great agitation; I asked him 'What was the matter?' He said, '*That* fellow, Dick, ——, has just left—he has been abroad, and has brought from Paris one of Jecker's circles—he tells me, that to avoid payment of duty for it, he has had the name of "*Troughton*" engraved on it,—and he has asked me to let one of my workmen go down to the Custom-house, and clear it for him as an *English* instrument. I told him I would rather cut off my right hand, than be concerned in such a rascally transaction: and from what he said,



I am not sure if W..... is not as deep in the mud as Dick is in the mire.' I replied, 'I hope not.' Mr. Troughton then said, 'I told the fellow, if he wanted to rob the Revenue by perjury, he must get some other person to help him; and he went away in great dudgeon.'

"Some few days afterwards, calling on my old friend Troughton, I crossed him in the passage, between his shop and his parlour, as he was coming down-stairs; taking me by the hand, he led me to the window at the further part of the room, and bowing to the window-sill, he introduced me, with a look of contempt which I shall never forget, to a *circle* which was lying there; he put it into my hands, saying, 'It was the Jecker's circle which S..... had got from the Custom-house, but whether by swearing to a lie himself, or by having gotten some one to swear to a lie for him, he did not know.' He pointed to the name of 'Troughton' engraved on it, and said, 'The imitation was a very good one, and the fellow was an expert forger.'

"I am, Sir, yours, &c.

"JAMES SOUTH.

"OBSERVATORY, KENSINGTON, *January 19, 1852.*"\*

I am charged by the late Council of the Astronomical Society with having, in the foregoing letter, impeached the integrity of the late Mr. Sheepshanks, upon a conversation held thirty years before it was brought forward, with an eminent man who died twenty years before it was brought forward.

In my letter to the *Mechanics' Magazine*, I made,

\* In the *Mechanics' Magazine* "July" was by mistake printed instead of "January."



upon the authority of the late Mr. Troughton, two charges against the late Rev. Richard Sheepshanks.

- (1.) That he had procured from Paris one of Jecker's circles, and that he evaded the payment of the duty by having the name of "Troughton" engraved upon it.
- (2.) And that to evade the payment of the duty, he must either have been guilty of perjury, or subornation of perjury.

In the "Defensive Pamphlet" of the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks, as the late Council of the Royal Astronomical Society have ludicrously described it, he thus writes (p. 8) :—

"I saw a favourable account, by Sir Thomas Brisbane, of the performance of a circle of reflexion by Jecker of Paris; and, as a friend was going to Paris, in the winter, I believe, of 1823, I requested him to procure me a circle of Jecker's, and to get Troughton's name engraved upon it, so as to pass our Customs without duty, and without causing him delay or trouble. This was done, and the instrument, I am pretty sure, left by him at Troughton's shop in Flect Street, to have the inscription crased, and to be adapted to the stand of a British circle which Troughton had recently sold me. It is most probable that the officers at Dover had their attention drawn to the erroneous inscription by the Commissioner, and so passed it; but I can say nothing about this of my own knowledge.

"I own that I am now heartily ashamed of this transaction, although everybody smuggled in those days, directly or indirectly."

Can any unprejudiced person deny that Mr. Richard Sheepshanks has admitted :—

- (1.) Procuring a “eirele of Jecker’s” from Paris; and “getting Troughton’s name engraved upon it;”
- (2.) “So as to pass our Customs without duty?”

In respect of “the perjury, or the subornation of perjury,” it is clear that, in 1823, the “Circle” could not have passed “our Customs” without some person taking an oath that it was of British manufacture; but to this part of the transaction the Reverend Richard Sheepshanks cautiously and judiciously avoids giving any positive information or denial, although he confesses that he is “heartily ashamed of this transaction.”

The late Council of the Royal Astronomical Society, besides charging me with impeaching the integrity of the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks, have also accused me of having reported a “conversation alleged to have been held thirty years before it was brought forward, with an eminent man who died twenty years before it was brought forward.”

The “conversation” alluded to is the conversation I had with the late Mr. Troughton, the particulars of which I have given in my letter to the *Mechanics’ Magazine*.

The best answer I can afford to the misrepresentations of "the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society," implying that the integrity of the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks has only recently been impeached by me and for the first time, is the following copy of a letter which I received from the Rev. Dr. Robinson, Director of the Armagh Observatory :—

" OBSERVATORY, ARMAGH,  
June 15, 1853.

" DEAR SIR JAMES,—On my arrival here last night, I found yours, in which you tell me that Mr. Sheepshanks, while admitting that he caused the name of Troughton to be engraved on a circle of Jecker's for the purpose of evading the Revenue laws, denies the other facts stated by you in the *Mechanics' Magazine* (July\* 1852), and asserts that you invented them *after Troughton's death*.

" As to his denial of the facts, it may pass for its worth, but that you stated them long before Troughton's death all your friends can testify; of one instance I can give the date very nearly,—beginning of July, 1833. When coming to London from the meeting of the British Association at Cambridge, I found you and Troughton at issue about the luckless Equatorial. I saw with great pain two so long devoted friends, and whom I so greatly respected, on the verge of deadly feud, and endeavoured to prevent it. You will remember that you consented to leave the dispute to the arbitration of me or any one I would name, but Troughton would hear of no terms whatever. Yet when I reminded him of 'old times,' his heart did soften a little; but he said

\* It is printed "*July*" in the *Mechanics' Magazine*, but it ought to have been printed "*January*."

he could not act *without the consent of Mr. Sheepshanks*: and so the matter ended. *That day* I met you at dinner at Mr. F. Baily's, and told you how much I was disappointed. You certainly did not spare Mr. S. on the occasion. When I expressed my regret that a *Clergyman* should so far forget his duty as a *peacemaker*, you told an anecdote of him while in your house at Passy, which showed that such obligations did not press heavily on him; and when some of the company were surprised at his opinions, you told, *in all its parts*, the history given in the *Mechanics' Magazine*.

"*Then* it was quite familiar to me, and seemed so to Mr. Baily, so that I must have heard it in 1830 at latest. But this surely is needless: whatever faults you have, none who knows anything of you can possibly think want of truth is one of them; most certainly not.

"Yours ever,

"T. R. ROBINSON.

"SIR JAMES SOUTH."

The late Council of the Royal Astronomical Society state, that the "imputation" would not have been mentioned in "the Report" "except simply to record that sense of the utter needlessness of any reply to such an accusation, which the Council showed when they neglected the formal application made to them on the charge."

It may perhaps be inferred that I made a "formal application" to the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society upon the subject; but the fact is, that I never made, either directly or indirectly, any "application" to any Council of the

Royal Astronomical Society, or to any other Society, in respect of my controversies with the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks.

From the *sneaking* notice by the late Council of the Royal Society, and from the *impudent* notice of the late Council of the Royal Astronomical Society, a degree of notoriety has been given to the "Defensive Pamphlet" which it could not otherwise have acquired. I am therefore compelled to notice a charge of fraud which the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks has made against me, viz., that my dispute with the late Mr. Troughton was only to evade my pecuniary liabilities to that gentleman. Thus, at p. 14 it is stated :—

"It is the opinion of all persons conversant with the parties, that Sir James would not have paid except on compulsion; and that no one except myself could have been found to carry this compulsory process into execution. I myself have no doubt of this."

Perhaps the accompanying letters from Sir David Brewster and Mr. Gwilt will slightly illustrate the degree of reliance which ought to be placed upon the assertions of the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks :—

"ALLERLY, BY MELROSE,  
Feb. 23, 1833.

"MY DEAR SIR JAMES,—During the week which I spent under your roof, and especially during the many observations which I made with the large Equatorial in company with yourself and others, I saw the great distress and vexation in which you were involved, by the instability of the instrument. I had heard also

from others, that Mr. Troughton had suffered equal vexation from the same cause; and I therefore felt an unusual degree of interest in the measures which were proposed to remove the recoil of the telescope.

“On the day when Mr. Simms came to the observatory to apply the friction rollers, I recollect well your having requested me to impress upon him the necessity of making every exertion to render the instrument fit for observation, and to hint to him how injurious a failure in this respect would be to his professional reputation. You had more than once stated to me your conviction, that no good would be derived from the application of the friction rollers, and I was therefore anxious to be present at the trial of them.

“With this view, I spent a long time in the observatory with Mr. Simms; having quitted it, I returned frequently during the day. I found Mr. Simms perfectly sensible that the instrument was a failure, and exceedingly anxious, both on your account and for the sake of his professional name, to give it the stability which it required. He anticipated great advantages from the rollers; but after the numerous experiments which were made in my presence, and in which I assisted, I was perfectly convinced, and he seemed to be so also, that the cause of the recoil could not be removed by such means. We discussed the hypothesis of a momentary twist in the frame arising from the elasticity of the materials; and with the view of throwing some light on the subject, he applied a telescope with a micrometer, which he had brought with him for the purpose. The observations, however, did not indicate any perceptible change of form.

“If I recollect rightly, you were in London when these experiments were going on; and upon your return I mentioned to you all that had been done in the observatory. On this and on other occasions, I remember



your stating to me that you had offered to pay Mr. Troughton all that he had expended, provided that he would adopt the plan of the five feet Equatorial, which you had from the first thought the best, but which, in deference to Mr. Troughton's opinion, had been abandoned.

"At dinner, the whole subject was diseussed between yourself, Mr. Simms, and me; and I recollect that you expressed yourself in the strongest manner, both in reference to the total obstruction of your own observations, and to the influence which a failure in reetifying the instrument would have on his professional character.

"Such is the substance of what I distinctly recollect; much more was said on the subject, and if I were near you, I dare say you might recall a great deal of it to my remembrance.

"I am,

"Ever most faithfully yours,

"D. BREWSTER.

"To SIR JAMES SOUTH."

"20, ABINGDON STREET, Jan. 16th, 1833.

"DEAR SIR JAMES,—In answer to your favour of yesterday, I have to observe to you, that previous to your journey to Russia, in my conversations with Mr. Simms, relative to the Equatorial, he has more than once expressed to me his regret at its unfortunate failure, and his surprise at your great patience and forbearance with his firm; and most particularly did he so on one occasion when walking home from your house, and with an expression to me of the unpleasant feeling he had as to the amount of the cost compared with the inefficiency of the work done. My recollection of this last-named



conversation is, from accidental circumstances, particularly strong.

“Believe me, dear Sir James,

“Yours very faithfully,

“JOS. GWILT.

“*To* SIR JAMES SOUTH.”

On the 18th of October, 1833, Messrs. Troughton & Simms, in a letter to Messrs. Few & Co., offered to leave the matters in difference to—using their own language—

“Indifferent and unquestionable judges, for instance, the Astronomer Royal, Sir John Herschel, Mr. Baily, Captain Kater, Captain Beaufort, Captain Smyth, &c.; or by a certain number of referees appointed on each side.”

On the 30th of October, 1833, Messrs. Few & Co., in a letter to Messrs. Troughton & Simms, stated—

“Sir James South would not object to a reference of the entire case to the gentlemen named in your letter of the 18th inst.; but as from the circumstance of Sir John Herschel being under early engagements to quit the country, we apprehend it would be impossible for him to give his attention to it. Sir James would propose the substitution of the name of Dr. Robinson, of Armagh, for that of Sir John Herschel: we write on the assumption that he, and all the others, will consent to become referees.”

The offer made on the 18th of October by Messrs. Troughton & Simms was, however, after

its substantial acceptance by Messrs. Few & Co. on the 30th of October, withdrawn, by a letter from Messrs. Chisholme & Co. to Messrs. Few & Co., of which the following is a copy:—

“64, LINCOLN’S INN FIELDS, Dec. 3d, 1833.

“DEAR SIRS,—We beg to propose on behalf of Messrs. Troughton and Simms, to refer all matters in difference between them and Sir James South to the determination of a Sergeant or Barrister-at-Law, to be mutually agreed on, Messrs. Troughton and Simms having liberty of access to the Equatorial with their workmen and scientific friends, at such times and under such conditions and restrictions as the arbitrator shall direct, for the purpose of putting the instrument into working order, and of adjusting the same with the use of Sir James’s large object glass. Should your client agree to this, we will prepare and send you the draft agreement for your perusal.

“We are, dear Sirs,

“Yours obediently,

“CHISHOLME, HALL & GIBSON.”

To this letter Messrs. Few & Co. returned the following answer to Messrs. Chisholme & Co. :—

“COVENT GARDEN,  
Dec. 7th, 1833.

“DEAR SIRS,—We take shame to ourselves for not earlier replying to your favour of the 3d, by stating that we cannot advise Sir James South to refer such a subject to any gentleman of the bar, satisfied that scientific persons can alone be competent to do justice to either party, and such certainly at one time appeared to be the opinion of your clients.

" We have only to repeat our readiness to refer all questions, as stated in our letter of the 30th October to Messrs. Troughton and Simms.

" We are, dear Sirs,

" Yours, &c.

" FEW, HAMILTON, & FEW."

On the 12th of December, 1833, Messrs. Chisholme & Co. sent a letter, of which the following is a copy, to Messrs. Few & Co. :—

" 64, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS.

" DEAR SIRs,—Messrs. Troughton and Simms and Sir James South.—As you altogether decline a reference to a barrister, and as we cannot advise our clients to accede to the reference proposed by you, we are driven to the other alternative, of commencing an action.

" We enclose process for your undertaking, which we presume you will give.

" We remain, dear Sirs,

" Yours faithfully,

" CHISHOLME, HALL & GIBSON."

It is upon these facts that I have been accused by the late Reverend Richard Sheepshanks, in his "Defensive Pamphlet," of being a "shabby, shuffling debtor."

The Reverend Richard Sheepshanks has also stated in his "Defensive Pamphlet," that "the only remark which he [Troughton] made during

the contest was, that I had not acted with sufficient vigour towards Sir James. ‘You should have arrested him,’ he said: ‘the fellow has a white feather. Frazi arrested him and got paid.’”

Frazi never arrested me;\* and the following copy of a letter which I received from Mr. Seaward,† who was conversant with all the facts of the case, will establish the malice and falsehood of the language in the foregoing extract:—

“CANAL IRON WORKS,  
March 14, 1837.

“DEAR SIR,—I am truly surprised at the contents of your letter of this date, that circumstances should have occurred to render it necessary for you to inquire of me whether your conduct towards Mr. Frazi on the subject of the large dome of your observatory was incompatible with the feelings of an honourable man, or inconsistent with the sentiments of a gentleman; such I understand having been insinuated against you by Messrs. Sheepshanks and Simms, through their counsel, Mr. Starkie.

“I remember perfectly well having been introduced to you by Mr. Simms, for the purpose of offering you

\* I may here observe, that during the continuance of my disputes with the late Mr. Troughton, I implicitly followed the advice of my friends—Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, Mr. Joseph Gwilt, the Rev. Dr. Robinson, Mr. Babbage, the late Dr. J. Scott, and the late Mr. Francis Baily. And in my controversies with Mr. Frazi, I acted under the advice of Mr. Seaward, Mr. Simms, Sir Francis Beaufort, Mr. Joseph Gwilt, Mr. Babbage, the late Dr. J. Scott, the late Mr. Francis Baily, and the late Mr. Troughton.

† Until Mr. Simms introduced me to this distinguished engineer, I had not the honour even of his personal acquaintance. He represented him to me as a man of the highest integrity and of the soundest judgment—and that to him I might confide the examination of Frazi’s “scandalous bill” beyond any Civil Engineer with whom he was acquainted.

my advice and assistance, among other things, respecting the claim of Mr. Frazi for work done to the large dome, and in which claim I must say you had great reason to be dissatisfied.

"You adopted my recommendation in the settlement of that claim, and it is with the greatest pleasure that I can bear testimony to your gentlemanly and honourable conduct throughout that transaction; and I will most cheerfully attend to state the same on oath, if you shall find it necessary for me to do so.

"I am, dear Sir,

"Your most obedient Servant,

"JOHN SEAWARD.

"To SIR JAMES SOUTH, F.R.S., &c. &c."

The Councils of the Royal Society generally contain a certain number of titled or eminent persons, whose avocations preclude them from rendering proper attention to the scientific and ordinary business of the Society. The result is, that *little men*, under the shadow of this aristocracy, have a commanding influence over the proceedings—elect their own miserable *toadies* to office, and do everything in their power to crush men of learning who will not be subservient to their selfish views and absurd pretensions; in fact, the working and unassuming men of science are insulted and oppressed by the *little men*, under the name of "the President and Council of the Royal Society."

"Truth and Justice" force me to say, that if the

members of the Council of the Royal Society were, instead of allowing the interests of science to be injured by a coterie of “two or three make-believe philosophers,” to *reform themselves*,\* by adopting the valuable suggestions of their late President, the Earl of Rosse—alike distinguished for his learning, liberality, and *hospitality*—for increasing the number of the Council, and other useful reforms; and if the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society were to govern its public proceedings in such a manner as to prevent the *noses* of their officers from being pulled by the members at the *Scientific Meetings* of their Society:—they would be more creditably employed than in interfering with the personal controversies of the Fellows, and publishing, either through ignorance or malice, false and unfounded charges against myself.

I have the honour to be,

My LORDS and GENTLEMEN,

Your obedient Servant,

J. SOUTH.

OBSERVATORY, KENSINGTON,  
3d April, 1856.

\* *Vide* Copy of Memorandum presented to the Council of the Royal Society by the Right Hon. the Earl of Rosse, in Appendix.

## APPENDIX.

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MEMORANDUM\* PRESENTED TO THE COUNCIL OF THE  
ROYAL SOCIETY BY THE EARL OF ROSSE.

“A ROUGH Memorandum hastily written with the view of throwing out some hints for consideration relative to the question, whether it may not be practicable to strengthen the Royal Society, and render it more efficient in presiding over the science of the country?

“The Royal Society, in all its arrangements, has continued nearly the same since its foundation. The Council consists of the same number of Members, the days of meeting are the same, and even the routine of business remains almost unchanged. In the meantime new sciences have sprung up, and the old sciences have branched out so vigorously that there are now individual sciences which consist of so many special departments, that in dimensions they may be said to be little inferior to the natural sciences in their aggregate, as they existed in the first days of the Royal Society. Moreover, there are now various societies, the offshoots of the Royal Society, which share its labours; it no longer stands alone; its relations to science have undergone a great change. The habits and customs of the people of this country have also been somewhat changed since Charles II.'s reign. It will perhaps be granted, therefore, that there is at least a *prima facie* case for the

\* I am indebted for a copy of this Memorandum to my friend Mr. A. J. Stephens, who placed it at my absolute disposal.



inquiry, whether the Royal Society, under its ancient constitution, is as efficient for promoting the objects for which it was originally instituted, as it would be if it was slightly altered in some of its arrangements so as better to meet the *present* wants of science? The Council originally consisted of twenty-one Members as it does now, and it probably was then large enough to admit of science being fully represented within it. Were it now many times larger, it would be scarcely large enough. In disposing of the Government grant, to obtain a quasi representation of science, an equal number of Fellows was added to the Council, and a great advantage was thus gained without any countervailing injury. In testing the merits of the various papers tendered for publication in the Transactions, referees are selected from the Society at large, and an attempt has thus been made to meet the difficulty that science has entirely outgrown the dimensions of the Council. Without that expedient, matters would have long since come to a dead lock. In a Council so small it is impossible to secure a satisfactory representation of the leading scientific societies, and it is scarcely to be expected that, under such circumstances, they will continue to publish inferior papers while they send the best to our Transactions.

“ In the award of medals, there are great and acknowledged difficulties from the same cause. Important as it is that all the sciences should be represented upon the Council, it seems to be no less important that the Royal Society itself should be adequately represented there. In Charles the Second's reign, the Society consisted of little more than one hundred Fellows, the Council being twenty-one, while there are seven hundred Fellows with the same Council. That circumstance alone has greatly changed the character of the Society, so large a proportional number of Fellows are now shut out practically from the Council. Thus excluded from a real partici-

pation in the government of the Society, and having no scientific business to transact there will be little to interest them; and even from that little something has been taken unavoidably by the recent salutary change in the manner of electing the Fellows. To impart additional interest to the evening meetings seems to be impossible, as it is only where a Society takes charge exclusively of one Science, that there can be good discussions generally intelligible; and therefore, in fact, a Fellow not on the Council can have little to interest him, except in the opportunities afforded to him of meeting his friends after the papers have been read. With respect to the election of the Fellows, the exclusive character of the new system appears to be the principal subject of complaint; in fact, that powers so great should be exercised by so small a section of the Society.

“With a larger Council the continued endurance of the new system would be obviously more certain. The Royal Society contains a large body of Fellows, of high general education; many of them having been successful competitors for University honours in the mathematical and physical sciences,—have very strong additional claims,—they are necessarily excluded from the Council because there is no room for them; they cannot be taken as the representatives of special sciences. There are others, perhaps, less conversant with matters of pure science; men of the world, however, and men of influence. Their aid would be invaluable in carrying out scientific objects to which the Government of the country is necessarily a party; they, however, are excluded also. An attempt has been made, indeed, by the British Association to supply the want of an influential Council here, by requesting certain Members of Parliament to act as a Committee, and communicate with Government, but in this arrangement there is something forced and

awkward. It can scarcely be said that such a Committee is a recognised body, and has any proper business; and besides, it is well known that all Governments look upon little coteries of Parliamentary men with jealousy rather than with favour. The weakness of our Council has been recently felt in the failure of the repeated applications for the publication of Mr. Huxley's Researches, and in the failure of the project for the exploration of the Southern Sidereal Hemisphere, to which so much valuable time had been devoted; and I might, perhaps, add, in the tardiness with which the first steps have been taken to meet the wishes of scientific men by providing accommodation for the Societies. It is a large subject, but I think it could be shown that the position of Science in this country will much depend upon the strength or weakness of the Council of the Royal Society.

“The time is evidently approaching when each Science will have its own Society, and some of the best friends of the Royal Society have looked forward to that time with great apprehension. With the Council as at present constituted, their fears, perhaps, would be realised; but with a large and powerful Council, *organized in due time*, the Royal Society, in my opinion, would have nothing to apprehend. It would be a centre of union and strength to the other Societies; they, through some of the distinguished Members of their Councils, would be represented upon it, and for scientific objects it would wield their influence. In that case, even if every Science had its Society, and if they published everything, withholding their best papers, which they would not be likely to do, seeing that they were represented here, still there would remain to the Royal Society the great and proper vocation of exercising a presiding influence over the Science of this country. It would be the adviser of the Government in its rela-

tions with Science, pointing out, on the one hand, where the State might usefully interfere for the advancement of Science; pointing out, on the other, where Science might be advantageously brought to bear in promoting the interests of the State.

“ To what extent it would be necessary, in effecting the proposed objects, to add to the numbers of the Council, is a question which would require much consideration; but, from the experience we have had in the Committee of Recommendations, it is clear that if the Council was twice as numerous it would not act less smoothly. Further, to strengthen the Council, it would be desirable that arrangements should be made, so that its sittings should be held during the Parliamentary Session. In that way, it would be thrown open to country gentlemen who have no professional calls in London. At present, country gentlemen cannot act with satisfaction upon the Council, when they are necessarily absent from many of its most important meetings. I apprehend that the proposed changes could not be effected without a new Charter, which would be attended with some expense. But I have no doubt a moderate subscription from the Fellows who are *Patrons* of Science would be amply sufficient, without entailing any burden upon the Fellows, who, being actively engaged in the prosecution of scientific research, necessarily subject themselves to heavy expenses, besides the sacrifice of so much valuable time.”

Anxious to know on official authority what had been the fate of this “ Memorandum,” so well calculated to strengthen the Royal Society by weakening, or perhaps annihilating, the baneful influence of the *little men* who govern it, I addressed a letter to the Assistant Secretary, of which the following is an extract :—

“ OBSERVATORY, KENSINGTON,  
*Monday, March 31, 1856.*

“ Sir J. South presents his compliments to the Assistant Secretary of the Royal Society, and will be obliged if he will acquaint him whether a ‘ Memorandum presented to the Council of the Royal Society by the Earl of Rosse, with the view of throwing out some hints for consideration relative to the question whether it may not be practicable to strengthen the Royal Society, and render it more efficient in presiding over the science of the country,’ has been entered on any and what Journals of the Society—what is the date which the original document bears—and at what Meetings of the Council it was taken into consideration—whether it has been printed by order of the Council; and if so, under what date—and, lastly, whether it has been circulated by the Council amongst the Fellows of the Society indiscriminately, or solely amongst themselves?

“ The bearer of this note will wait for the Assistant Secretary’s reply.”\*

As the Assistant Secretary was not at home when (a quarter past two o’clock P.M.) this letter was delivered, and was not expected to return to it until four or five o’clock, the Clerk of the Society sent a verbal message that “ an answer to it should be sent me by the post.”

Accordingly, at a quarter before eight on the following night, I received a letter from the Assistant Secretary, of which the following is a copy :—

“ THE ROYAL SOCIETY, SOMERSET HOUSE,  
*April 1, 1856.*

“ SIR,—I beg to inform you, in answer to your letter of the 31st ult., that Lord Rosse’s Memorandum to

\* The remaining part of this letter had no reference to the “ Memorandum,” and therefore is omitted.



which you refer has not been entered on the Journals of the Royal Society.

“ The Memorandum was a ‘ confidential ’ document, intended for the use of Members of Council, and as such was printed and circulated among the Members of the Council only without any date being attached to it.

“ On the 28th of June, 1855 (at a Meeting of Council), Mr. Tite (Member of Council) gave notice, that at the first Meeting of Council, in November, he would move that a Special Committee be appointed to consider the suggestions contained in the Memorandum which Lord Rosse had presented that day on the subject of changes in the Constitution of the Society.

“ On the 8th of November, 1855, Mr. Tite (at a Meeting of Council) after referring to the difficulties which he believed would attend any measure involving an interference with the Society’s Charter, intimated that he did not deem it advisable to proceed with his intended motion with reference to the changes in the Royal Society referred to in Lord Rosse’s Memorandum.

“ I am, SIR,

“ Your obedient Servant,

“ C. R. WELD,

“ *Assist. Sec. R. S.*

“ SIR JAMES SOUTH.”